DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 280 PS 019 211

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TITLE Improving Home-School Communication in the Secondary School: Ideas Worth Sharing for an Active Partnership. SCRE Spotlights 30.
INSTITUTION Scottish Council for Research in Education.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 7p.
AVAILABLE FROM Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St. John Street, Edinburgh, EH8 BJR, Scotland, United Kingdom.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Educational Improvement; *Family School Relationship; Foreign Countries; Guidelines; *High Schools; Secondary Education; Secondary School Curriculum; Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Scotland

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on improving communication between home and school in the areas of curriculum and assessment. Research based on interviews with headteachers, management staff, guidance staff, subject-based staff, and parents, suggests several guidelines. Suggestions for preferred practices are offered so that school staff can check them against actual practices. These suggestions concern: (1) the school in its community; (2) the roles of asking and listening in the two-way process of communication; (3) the process of meeting with parents in groups; (4) written communication; (4) the process of communicating information about individual students; (5) the need to work on the development of personal relationships between parents and school staff; and (6) the process of improving school communication. It is concluded that the formation of partnership between home and school is not without difficulty. Two areas seem to demand immediate attention. The first is the challenge of discovering ways of tapping into the views of parents who do not readily answer survey questions or respond to invitations. The second area is teacher education. In terms of working with parents, the "sink or swim" situation of simply learning on the job can no longer be allowed. (RH)

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SCRE SPOTLIGHTS 30

# IMPROVING HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

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## Ideas worth sharing for an active partnership

Judy Arrowsmith, Moray House College

*"Hadn't a clue what to say to parents."*
—Teachers, having received no formal preparation for working with parents

*"The information we were given was helpful and there was plenty of it but we found the biggest help was speaking to the teachers at the school."*
—A parent

PS 019211

Good home-school communication is now seen as essential. The focus of this paper is on how communication can be improved specifically in relation to curriculum and assessment. What can be learnt from schools working hard on better communication? What ideas are around to help?

## GOOD COMMUNICATION

Research into how better communication can be encouraged is scarce. Of course, it is difficult to generalise since methods of communication and the extent to which they have been refined differ enormously across schools. In addition, each school is unique, working in its own catchment area, with particular staff and parents and with varying histories of involvement. Some schools are far advanced with monitoring groups involving parents, teachers and members of the community to evaluate their practice and suggest improvements. Others, while seeing the need for better contact, do not know how to move forward beyond basic parents' evenings, focussing on the individual child's progress.

Each school has to work out a communication system appropriate for and peculiar to itself. However, that does not mean each must be left to its own devices. At a very practical level, simply sharing ideas which have been tried and tested in schools already, or have been suggested by those involved in the process, is as good a first stage as any of 'trying to do better'. Approaches can then be modified to fit a particular situation or to spark off ideas of alternatives. All schools can benefit from consideration of evidence of good practice.

## IDENTIFYING GOOD PRACTICE

It was with the aims of describing means of communication found beneficial and of highlighting the dynamic, evolving nature of the process of trying to improve, that this research project was undertaken. Evidence was gathered to identify issues worth raising and ideas worth sharing so as to help schools evaluate their own efforts from the viewpoints of both staff and parents. The three schools studied were chosen for their positive attention to communication with parents.

It is clear that with a wider sample of schools equally valid alternatives might emerge, each tailored to the particular needs of a community. It is reasonable to assume that a school with a large scattered rural or island catchment area would place the emphasis on different communication techniques from one where most pupils live on the doorstep; and equally, that a school whose parents, in the main, are confident and articulate, will not operate identically to that whose parents have to be nursed towards interest after years of experience of 'not interfering'.

This study should be seen as a contribution to the discussion on effective teacher / parent communication, offering food for thought and raising questions, rather than testing hypotheses and providing 'pat' answers.

## GOOD PRACTICE? WHO SAYS?

'Good practice' in communication has to be judged, at least in part, by the participants. Questionnaires and survey techniques did not seem to be appropriate in what was basically a study of relationships. It was decided to collect the evidence mainly by talking to those involved, giving people the opportunity to relax and air their views, to discuss their apprehensions and share ideas. Their perceptions and understandings (or misunderstandings) had to be established. Structured interviews were conducted with a variety of informants from each school. This was to avoid the pitfalls of trying to generalise about, say, parent attitudes across schools, irrespective of different methods of organisation and practice.

We interviewed headteachers and management staff, guidance staff, a cross-section of subject-based staff and, of course, parents. Parents were interviewed in their own homes, a lengthy procedure, but one we felt to be justified because on the whole a representative sample does not accept invitations to meetings or to complete questionnaires. This was supplemented by information provided by school handbooks, written correspondence and handout material, although there was the constant feeling that 'paperwork' did not really reflect the essence of good communication, built as it is on personal relationships.

## THE GENERAL CONCLUSION

From the school studies, it was clear that policy was not created in the abstract - it developed and continues to evolve through a close relationship with the people involved. It changes as needs and understanding change. Good personal relations emerged as fundamental, if possible through face-to-face contact or telephone conversation as well as through written information and notes. The more familiar parents and members of the community were with what goes on in school, the more confident they were. The study suggests that if parents and teachers actually get the chance to pause and consider communication issues there are plenty of comments and suggestions forthcoming. Time spent airing these views together is time well spent.

**From the study, suggestions emerged which it might be worth schools checking against their own practice.**

## THE SCHOOL IN ITS COMMUNITY

- Improve informal communication by allowing and encouraging community involvement, giving more open access to the school - and therefore incidental familiarity with what goes on.
- Communicate with the whole local community about school affairs - make school the focus of local interest -
  - posters in local shops, churches and health centres
  - announcements in the local paper.

## A 2-WAY PROCESS

**Asking and listening**

- Issue a summary of the school policy on communication about curriculum and assessment matters, including both written and oral communication and ask for comment. A brief questionnaire directly from the school (rather than via the parents' association or an independent body) might tap parents' views, or less formal checks can be negotiated
- Survey parents' responses to specific aspects of communication about the curriculum. This can be undertaken from time to time and the findings discussed.

**Meetings: parents as a group**

Hold classes/workshops for parents and meetings where ideas are shared-

- Perhaps a meeting where a department presents its subject and then involves parents in thinking about curricular implications.
- Or a year meeting for parents before the start of the session to brief them on the main events of the coming year for pupils.
- Experiment with smaller groupings, eg class/year/interest groups.

HOWEVER, check out who would be involved. Simply offering more and more meetings might add stress for teachers and be of dubious value.

- Improve Parent-Teacher Meetings by involving pupils, issuing personal invitations and publicity
- Try an Open Day or Open Hours
- Where are the meetings held? Always in the school? Would a change in location for certain meetings help?

**Written communication**

*The newsletter-*

- Have a newsletter.
- Improve it by asking for ideas and feedback.
- Include some information on community activities and clubs, especially if the school wants to be seen as part of the community.
- Print a telephone number on top to facilitate a quick phone comment.
- Remember that parents are interested in achievements, of the school and of individual pupils.

*Handbooks*

- Produce a 'What to do ...' booklet for parents, to give practical advice on how, when and where to get information, whom to consult to sort out particular kinds of problem.
- Provide details of all courses and subject areas offered at school, written in parent-friendly style (no jargon).
- Stage-by-stage handbooks might be appropriate, or whole school policy statements, such as homework requirements.
- Study what careers information and guidance goes back to parents. Is it sufficient?

Fine, but that's only stage one, how do you get the paper to the parent?

- Explore alternative ways of ensuring communications arrive home rather than relying purely on pupil post, eg issuing the newsletter on a regular date so that parents expect information and look for it.
- (Duplicate copies in shop windows, libraries etc will remind shoppers to ask pupils for the new issue.)

**About the individual child**

*Written reports*

- Study reporting methods and try to negotiate a format and way of conveying assessment and information which is both understandable to parents and yet acceptable to staff, given the diverse nature of the subjects studied.
- Discuss how much detail is required (teachers warn against comments being 'excessive in volume', parents dislike bland, global statements).
- Should there be a comment on attitude as well as progress? (Parents seem to like this.)
- Could more space be left for realistic and fuller comment by teachers?
- Should there be space for parents' comment? (Parents seem to like 'chequebook style' reports, with a small page per subject and room for overall comment.)
- Explore the possibilities for computerised reporting, making a basic report available whenever parents request - perhaps with interpretive comment by guidance staff. Discuss the possible drawbacks.

*Parents' evenings*

- Check the arrangements for parents' evening so that follow-up discussion is the most satisfactory in terms of time and timing for both parents and teachers (noting that both parents and teachers seem to want more time).
- If there is a clash of opinions, work an experimental period and keep a careful note of staff and parent reaction. Modify in the light of opinion.
- Discuss whether parents' evenings should always be a follow-up to reports or might that restrain discussion?

## WORK ON PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

> *"I wouldn't phone unless it was urgent. I wouldn't know who to ask for. There are so many teachers you lose track."*

Build up good personal relationships between individual parents and school staff-

- Especially with a known person eg a first-level guidance teacher.
- Discuss ways of achieving more non-class contact time for teachers to enable adequate communication time, eg by juggling Planned Activity Time.
- Explore possibilities of social functions being held outwith school.
- Check that within-school communication on curricular development takes place concurrently with home-school communication.
- Guarantee a listening ear to anyone who needs to make contact.

## IMPROVING SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

- Ensure discussion time and in-service training for teachers in the handling of parent-school communication.
- Keep a record of any experiment, together with the feedback obtained from all parties involved.

Good communication, with greater understanding between home and school, tends to lead to greater benefits for pupils. School Boards are required to"promote contact between the school, parents of pupils in attendance of the school and the community". The law is enforcing what seems to be a pre-requisite of satisfactory education. It reflects the growing demand for good home-school cooperation. Boundaries between school learning and learning through living have become increasingly blurred, and those involved in encouraging learning realise the necessity for active partnership. Whilst parents remain legally responsible for the education of their children it is right that they should enlist the help of professionals - but they do not simply hand over children to professionals. They must work together, each being respected for their different contribution.

Efforts should be made to explore new approaches to communication. As long as parents and teachers plan and work together to make communication more effective, and are honest with each other about their response to any new efforts, a greater sense of partnership must emerge.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Such partnership, however, is not without difficulty. It involves time and hard work. Two areas seem to demand immediate attention. The first is the challenge of discovering ways of tapping into the views of those parents who do not readily answer survey questions or respond to invitations. Secondly teacher education, in terms of working with parents, is seen to be a clear need — we can no longer allow the 'sink or swim' situation of simply learning on the job.

The research report *Parent-Teacher Communication in the Secondary School (curriculum and assessment matters)* by Judy Arrowsmith and Kate Ward is published by Moray House College. The research was funded by SED through SCOR. It took place between October 1988 and September 1989.

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Printed and published by the Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St John Street, Edinburgh, EH8 8JR, November 1990.